

# Proceedings of GREAT Day

---

Volume 2014

Article 2

---

2015

## Spenser's *Epithalamion*: A Representation of Colonization through Marriage

Emily Ercolano  
*SUNY Geneseo*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

---

### Recommended Citation

Ercolano, Emily (2015) "Spenser's *Epithalamion*: A Representation of Colonization through Marriage," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*. Vol. 2014, Article 2.

Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2014/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the GREAT Day Collections at KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of GREAT Day by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact [KnightScholar@geneseo.edu](mailto:KnightScholar@geneseo.edu).

# Spenser's *Epithalamion*: A Representation of Colonization through Marriage

Emily Ercolano

Edmund Spenser is believed to have been born in London in the year 1552 and to have died in 1599 in Ireland, where he spent the majority of his career. Unlike the contemporary English poets of his age, Spenser was not born into wealth and nobility, but after receiving an impressive education at the Merchant Taylors' School, Pembroke College, and Cambridge, he served as an aid and secretary to the earl of Leicester, who was a favorite of the queen's. While in the earl's service Spenser met Sir Phillip Sydney and Sir Edward Dyer whom he joined in advocating a new English poetry.

His first published work, *The Shepheardes Calender* released in 1579, aided this movement using archaic, rustic language as homage to Chaucer, and to create a native English style. Spenser continued experimenting with language, particularly with rhythm scheme in the Spenserian sonnet which was adopted from the Italian canzone form, and Spenserian stanza of nine lines in hexameter, which he employed in his great work *The Faerie Queene*: the longest poem in the English language. After publishing his first work, Edmund Spenser spent the rest of his life in Ireland where he held various governmental positions dealing extensively with the resistance to colonial rule. His genuine interest and fascination with Irish culture in a colonial setting is very apparent in the *Epithalamion*, which takes the form of classical love poetry written for a couple on their marriage day. Spenser utilizes allusions to Classicism and folk lore and simile in order to characterize the speaker as well as express the parallel between the colonized new bride and the colonizing of Ireland.

The *Epithalamion* revolves around the actions of the male speaker, a groom preparing for his wedding while encouraging his bride to awake and prepare so they may perform the ritual act of matrimony, first in the public church, then through private consum-

mation through sexual intercourse. The speaker, who is the groom, begins by calling upon the muses and then describes the procession of the bride, the ritual rites, the wedding party, the preparation for the wedding night, and lastly the wedding night with the physical consummation of the marriage. The form of the poem parallels the content and firmly places the setting in Ireland. Max Wickert points out that the poem "[deals] with the events of twenty-four hours, has twenty-four stanzas" (Wickert 136) with "the demonstration of Spenser's symbolic use of 365 long lines to indicate the days of the year... and the twenty-four stanzas to signify the hours of the day, the sixteen before the change of refrain referring to the hours of daylight in Ireland on June 11, 1594" (137), Spenser's own wedding date. The poem's twenty-four stanzas are each composed of eighteen lines with a varying rhyme scheme that is connected through the concatenated rhythm derived from Petrarch. The meter employed throughout the majority of the poem is iambic pentameter.

Throughout the poem Spenser juxtaposes classical and Irish folk allusions to parallel and characterize the civilizing groom who's attempting to colonize his earthy, territorial bride. While the classical tradition is seen as continued through civilized English culture, the folk lore of Ireland and its connection to the woods are a source of uncivilized fear, or as Linda Laevell puts it "The woods lie outside the known, familiar world of the town and are the habitat of wolves, goblins and evil spirits, the vague threats of night" (Laevell 15). The speaker uses various classical allusions particularly to evoke and call upon Greco-Roman deities to persuade his wife into action.

The allusions to the muses, "Ye learned sisters which have oftentimes beene to me ayding" (Spenser 1-2), presents them as a vestige for the speaker, utilizing them not only in persuading his bride to awake

now but presumably has called upon them before. A power dynamic of male superiority is apparent in the assuredness the speaker presents in his commanding of the muses when he states “Bring with you all the Nymphs that you can heare both of the rivers and the forrests greene” (Spenser 37-8). This demanding tone continues as he calls upon:

Ye Nymphes of Mulla which with carefull  
heed, The silver scaly trouts doe tend full  
well, And greedy pikes which use therein  
to feed... And in his waters which your  
mirror make, Behold your faces as the  
christall bright, That when you come  
whereas my love doth lie, No blemish she  
may spie. (Spenser 56-66)

The nymphs of Mulla, a river near Spenser’s home in Ireland, serve as a merging force of colonization that brings the classical muses to a location outside of the classical realm assimilating an Irish location with an English, classically informed culture. The speaker also makes his sexist doctrine of male precedence known again in the line “And in his waters which your mirror make”, assuming that possession of the lake belongs to the fish he has characterized as male in which the female nymphs are merely inhabitants, echoing the idea of colonized female identity. The nymphs of Mulla are at the command of the speaker in domineering and colonizing his bride which Lauren Owens argues that “the nymphs themselves become mirrors, into which Elizabeth can look to see her own nature reflected. Looking into this mirror, Elizabeth will see “no blemishes”(4.66): she will see a nature, her nature, cleared of “rushes”, that is, any unseemly passion, any violent or impetuous desire; she will see nature without wantonness, a nature not “scattered light”(4.62)(Owens 48). The nymphs literally mirror for the bride, believed by Owens specifically to be Spenser’s wife Elizabeth, a mode of female identity under the cultural dominance of her husband and ultimately England. Her face will be removed of rushes or unseemly passion along with the other characteristics that the husband seeks to bridle in his bride. The bride will be unblemished in the eyes of classical tradition, English culture and ultimately the speaker, her husband, if she assumes a subservient position under him reflected in the accepted colonization of the nymphs and their role as a symbol of Ireland. Classical allusion is used in jux-

taposition to Irish folk allusions, characterizing the speaker as a colonist, whose aim is to impose a new order on his native bride as a form of English colonization within Ireland.

Simile is also essential in establishing the characterization of the domineering, colonial speaker, and the submissive bride accepting colonization. The speaker often uses simile to assimilate the Irish and folk traditions of the bride into English culture. This process is described by Christopher Warley in the statement :

Even as Ireland was presented as a barbaric place requiring English civility and market-based conceptions of land, Ireland was a place where the New English planters desired to live out an ideal feudal land possession and social distinction... Spenser constructs a feudal ideal which emerges out of his participation in the civilizing process. (Warley 571)

An example of this assimilation is when the speaker views his bride dressed from the marriage ceremony and states “Her long loose yellow locks lyke golden wyre, Sprinckled with perle... Doe lyke a golden mantle her attyre, And being crowned with a girland greene, Seeme lyke some mayden Queene. Her modest eyes abashed to behold So many gazers, as on her do stare, Upon the lowly ground affixed are” (Spenser 154-161). In describing her hair as “long losse yellow locks” and “being crowned with a girland greene” an image of the natural, wild beauty of the bride places her firmly in an Irish folk tradition associated with the natural world and barbaric forests. However, through the use of the similes “lyke a golden mantle her attire” and “lyke some mayden Queene”, the English cultural tradition is incorporated. A golden mantle suggests great material, commercial wealth such as to be gained through colonization by England. The phrase maiden Queen serves as an allusion to the Virgin Mary in Christian tradition, suggesting a triumph over pagan Celtic beliefs in Ireland. Not only is assimilation revealed as a product of English colonization for the bride, but male dominance and female subservience is reinforced. The characterizing qualities of the new bride are all physical and presented through the eyes of the male speaker who imbues his colonial belief system upon them. The description of her eyes as “modest” and being lowered to the

ground due to "so many gazers" reflects that the male speakers gaze is a cultural practice being copied by other wedding guests, assuming the role of colonizers. Ultimately, simile is used not just to represent the assimilating efforts of the groom on his bride but also characterizes the speaker as a firm believer in male dominance.

Edmund Spenser drew heavily upon his experience of living Ireland, using the colonization of the island as a thematic parallel to marriage in the *Epithalamion*. Throughout the poem, the reliance on allusions to both Classical mythology and Irish folk lore, as well as, the use of simile produces a view of the speaker as a misogynistic, colonist who seeks to dominate his new bride who he imbues with symbolic qualities related to pre-colonial Ireland.

## Works Cited

- Leavell, Linda. "And Yet Another Ring of Echoes in Spenser's 'Epithalamion'" *South Central Review* 3.2 (1986): 14-26. Print.
- Owens, Judith. "The Poetics of Accommodation in Spenser's 'Epithalamion'" *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 40.1 (2000): 41-62. Print.
- Spenser, Edmund. "Epithalamion" *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ninth Edition. Ed. Julia Reidhead. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 990-999. Print.
- Warley, Christopher. "'So Plenty Makes Me Poore': Ireland, Capitalism, and Class in Spenser's Amoretti and Epithalamion" *ELH* 69.3(2002): 567-598. Print.
- Wickert, Max A. "Structure and Ceremony in Spenser's Epithalamion" *EHL* 30.2 (1968): 135-157. Print.